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COCAINE KINGPIN SAYS HE WORKED FOR CIA

ATLANTA — Prosecutors charged yesterday that an escaped federal prisoner masterminded a vast cocaine operation while living as a fugitive in Colombia, and tried to arrange the murder of U.S. and Colombian agents after his arrest. Harold Rosenthal is on trial with 18 others in federal court on charges stemming from an operation that smuggled 5 tons of cocaine into the U.S. over a three-year period.

Rosenthal claims he was working for the CIA, gathering information on Marxist terrorist groups.

Rosenthal contends he had government permission to smuggle drugs as a cover for his work as a CIA agent in Colombia.

He was arrested last September in Bogota by Colombian police and U.S. agents while a fugitive from a federal prison in Memphis, Tenn., where he escaped in September 1981 while serving a drug sentence.

Asst. U.S. Attorney Craig Gillen said that the prosecution will produce evidence of conversations in which Rosenthal, after being expelled from Colombia, tried to direct "the assassination of the minister of justice of Colombia."

He also said Rosenthal wrote letters from the federal prison in Atlanta saying: "Tell No. 1 to get the motorcycles to shoot some agents there — U.S. and Colombians." Gillen did not identify "No. 1."

The defense contends that the CIA engineered Rosenthal's escape from the Memphis prison and then gave him clearance to deal cocaine in exchange for information on ties between Colombian Marxist terrorist groups and the Soviet Union.

An attorney for co-defendant Philip Bonadonna said that Rosenthal was working for U.S. intelligence.

Tight security was set up for the trial with metal detectors at the entrance to the courthouse and courtroom.